

Prison capacity worst in South

A report shows the state has 26,496 inmates in space designed for 12,388

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If you like having a little elbow room, don't go to prison in Alabama.

A new report from the Southern Legislative Conference notes Alabama's No. 1 spot among 16 Southern states when it comes to prison overcrowding. What's more, the Alabama Department of Corrections says the SLC's figures are low.

"Where they came up with this 22,406 (prison capacity) I don't know," said Corrections Department spokesman Brian Corbett. The capacity of Alabama's prison system is 12,388, the agency says.

If the SLC got the capacity wrong, it got the number of inmates right: 26,496 in July, or 214 percent of capacity.

Corbett suspects the low overcrowding figure came from a typographical error and said the Department of Corrections would contact SLC to correct the figure. The Southern Legislative Conference report looks at

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The Alabama Department of Corrections spends the least amount of money per inmate in the region, according to a recent report from the Southern Legislative Conference.

Maryland	\$60.12
North Carolina	\$57.92
Virginia	\$56.47
West Virginia	\$54.76
Tennessee	\$50.64
Georgia	\$47.73
Florida	\$47.36
Arkansas	\$47.33
Oklahoma	\$44.68
SLC* average	\$44.09
Kentucky	\$41.35
Texas	\$40.43
Montana	\$36.78
Missouri	\$36.54
Louisiana	\$33.93
South Carolina	\$26.30
Alabama	\$26.07

*Southern League Conference

Source: Southern Legislative Conference

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corrections systems in all 16 SLC states.

Even with SLC's low figure of 118 percent capacity, Alabama had the most overcrowded prison system in the report, 6 percent ahead of North Carolina, according to the analysis conducted by the Louisiana Fiscal Office.

As of Sept. 30, the state inmate population was at 190 percent of its design capacity.

The SLC also reported that Alabama spends less on its inmates than surrounding states — \$26.07 per inmate per day, or \$9,516 per year, based on information from the budget year ended Sept. 30, 2002.

"Number one; it says that the Alabama Department of Corrections has a very frugal budget," Corbett said, noting that SLC's calculation was based on operating expenses and not the

General Fund appropriation, which is smaller than the department's overall operating budget.

The Department of Corrections relies on inmate labor to produce tens of millions of dollars a year to keep the system running.

If SLC had used only the state appropriation figures, the cost per inmate would be even lower, Corbett said. Budget year 2003, which ended Sept. 30 of that year, figures are higher than those published by the SLC. In that budget year, the department spent \$10,243 per inmate per year, or \$28.06 per day.

The department's operating cost that year was \$267.7 million, but only \$232 million of that came from state coffers. The funding situation is reflected in other areas of the system. While Alabama spends less than other states, it also has the highest prisoner to guard ratio, with 10 prisoners to every corrections officer.

According to Corbett, these kind of working conditions contribute to the department's employee-turnover rate of 10.5 percent annually — or about 20 officers a month.

"When you get overcrowding, that's when it gets dangerous for (corrections officers)," said the Rev. Charlie Kendall, who runs the prison ministry for Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church.

Sherry Swiney, whose husband is in prison for capital murder, is especially concerned about the state of Alabama's prisons.

"Prison overcrowding is serious, and we are not seeing any signs of relief in Alabama," she said. "Three men in a one-man cell. That's ridiculous as well as inhumane," Swiney wrote in an e-mail. "It's not entirely the DOC's fault though. The situation is out of hand, coupled with the parole board and the courts being seriously backed up."